

Gail Reed
Manager, ATC Communications
Pan Am International Flight Academy
Miami, FL 33266

WHEN BETTER THAN NOTHING ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

ABSTRACT

In the aviation industry we have depended upon an internationally somewhat agreed upon set of communications in English in order to provide for the movement of aircraft. We often hope that this phraseology will be useful and sufficient for non-speakers of English. It's certainly better than nothing, we tell ourselves.

The dilemma we face is complex. Language acquisition is an extremely personal act. In the interest of political correctness, the English-speaking world treads lightly on the issue of requiring English as the international language of aviation out of respect for non-English languages and national sovereignty.

To help the industry internalize aviation English in the service of air safety, we need language programs that are highly interactive and utilize aviation vocabulary as the basis of language learning.

This paper calls for an international conference on aviation communication. There is a need to bring together those who regulate, those who teach and those who carry the daily burden of work in the aviation profession in order to assure one world of secure responses to the ordinary and extraordinary movements of global aircraft.

ONE SKY. ONE VOICE.

"BAW-496, Traffic one o'clock. 6 Miles West Bound. B-727 at Flight Level 240"

"Roger. Descend 240"

The participants in my ATC English classes tell me that at times it is better not to give out traffic information. Saying something is sometimes worse than saying nothing, maybe even dangerous. The language of aviation communication and confusion about what language standards should be is an unresolved dilemma in air safety and has been a topic of too little discussion and writing. It is a critical issue and is the topic of this paper.

Most of us listen to reports of aviation accidents that have occurred as a result of miscommunication until we have become desensitized to the news. The investigators and families of the victims are the ones left to understand the reality of these stories.

But we are, fortunately, in a position to initiate positive changes that are needed in our industry. We can establish agreements on international uniform phraseology, pronunciation, emergency language, and necessary standards of comprehension and speech. We can determine the strategy to implement one voice for aviation.

“The views from our tower simulator are breathtaking and the results of training are stunning.”

It is difficult enough to communicate within the English speaking world. Last September, Pan Am International Flight Academy where I work was purchased by a venture capitalist. There is now a new logo and further new acquisitions. A publicist was hired to write marketing materials for the ATC division.

I spent a lot of time with her touring our facilities and explaining the nature of our clients and the seriousness of our business. We looked at the equipment and spoke with people who were training there. When the first draft came back for our approval, we were amused and stunned somewhat speechless by her romantic description of “the breathtaking views” from our tower simulator. We pictured controllers in the tower with their mouths open in delight, staring at the lush Miami scenery, gaily-colored planes swooping gracefully around in every direction.

One of my colleagues pictured a “stunning” party taking place in the tower with four controllers raising their champagne glasses toward the center as four 747’s flew directly at them. The caption was “Toast.”

I edited the writing and returned it. The writer quit, storming as she left: “Nobody has EVER corrected my language before!”

Language is a very personal thing for most of us and we hate being corrected. We resent being told we have to change the way we speak. It is easy to understand, then, why a nation would

hide behind the cloak of national sovereignty and resist the notion that English should be the international language of aviation. Language training takes time and costs money. In addition, without standards there is no accountability for teaching. There is no prescribed strategy to achieve the “end game,” if you will.

“I wanted to visit America, but I wasn’t looking forward to studying grammar and the pronunciation. I didn’t think that we could ever talk together by the last day. I am proud.”

“Maria, that’s wonderful. I’m writing a paper for an International Aviation Training Symposium. May I quote you?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

Most of us can remember our early school experiences with learning a second language. I remember my junior high school foreign language class: there was a boy in the front of the room who flared his nostrils when he concentrated. I practiced until I could flare mine too. I also learned to cheat by writing vocabulary on the white rubber soles of my saddle oxfords.

I hated high school Latin language class because Miss Hook (who we were convinced was a native speaker of Latin) never smiled and gave demerits for each mistake. Three mistakes and we had to go to after-school tutorial classes.

In a college language class I met my husband. So you see from each example, for nearly all of us language study is high risk.

I asked my Russian students what they remembered about studying a foreign language when they were boys. Three of

them reached up and cuffed their neighbor on the head. There are exceptions, but for most of us, acquiring a second language for the sake of study just didn't take.

Imagine learning language for the first time the way most of us were expected to learn in school. We'd never speak. We'd look down at our books to avoid being called for recitation. We'd cram for one-time application in a final evaluation. Compare that "adult" pedagogy with nature's learning model.

Babies babble approximations of words and receive big rewards: a smile, a hug, a bottle, food. Language is practiced and rewarded. So much good, natural pedagogy takes place in the early years of language acquisition that no matter what culture they are born into and no matter how complex the language structure, babies learn the native tongue of their families.

Unfortunately, adults don't often get to learn language the same way as children. Neither do grown ups learn by the methods most typically used in English-as-a-Second-Language schools—writing in workbooks, sitting in front of computers, listening to tapes and being tested and punished by low scores on the TOEFL exam. Adults, like babies, need practice, reward and practical results.

The same principles of good training that take place in the simulator for the pilot or air traffic controller apply to the learner of language: practice, apply knowledge and skill in work-like situations.

In addition, here are six principles for language learning:

1. Know the students. The way to know students is to know what environment they come from, know their personal language resources, know their goals and the goals of their agency or employer.
2. Get out of the chairs. The way to learn a language is to use it. The resource of the classroom has been used up by the third day because the view from the chair has not changed. Instruction that is alive combines movement and talk. Explore the environment outside of the walls. It is possible to walk and chew gum.
3. Use real-life and real work scenarios. If learning grammatical structure is a goal, then aviation vocabulary should be the basis of that instruction. Botanists do not read Caesar to learn Latin botanical terms. There must be respect for students' limited time and the job they must do. Real scenarios respect the participants' intelligence.
4. Crunch the numbers. Good learning takes place in small groups. Surprisingly, computer labs can support small group learning opportunities. If classes are large, an instructor can work each day with small numbers while others use the lab. Time for one-on-one human instruction is essential.
5. Make use of the group. There's safety in numbers. Small groups teach each other with less inhibition. When instructors stop preaching, learning comes from the group.
6. Have fun. Remember what it is like when you are excited about learning.

Yet, more is needed than to improve the environment of language study.

“Okay. We’re agreed then. Pan Am Academy will submit a proposal to your country for radar, aerodrome and management training. What about English?”

“No, it won’t be necessary”

“Would you like me to include it in a separate proposal?”

“No. Just include a translator.”

In the 21 June, 1999, issue of Fortune Magazine, Ram Charan and Geoffrey Colvin paint an unflattering appraisal of recently failed CEO’s, complete with pictures of twelve of them on the cover. The article listed key names with companies such as General Motors, British Petroleum, Apple Computer, Westinghouse, AT&T, Philip Morris, Digital Equipment, Compaq, Delta Air Lines, IBM, Kodak and Kmart. The authors said that it was neither intelligence nor vision that contributed to the CEO’s leadership failure. It also was not in fundamental strategy that top executives failed, since their direction was usually considered to be strong. Failure was a result of execution. It is that simple. Not getting things done, being indecisive and not delivering on commitments are the gateways to hell.

In the global market place where travel and communication are essential there is increased pressure on our industry to provide the latest technology and best-trained work force to ensure corporate profits. Caught in the midst of global change and the pain of economic interdependence are developing nations who want a piece of the profit pie. The economic leadership of these countries and our own do not use as a motto,

“Well, what we’re doing is better than nothing.”

What are we doing? What international strategy concerning the language of aviation are we executing? There is none.

Throughout the world, Civil Aviation Agencies create their own in-house language training classes, often as a way to save money. Commercial language schools and universities offer language classes, usually as a way to make money.

There are hundreds of language teachers in institutions such as the Pan Am International Flight Academy teaching “Aviation English.” There is a lot of tongue wagging in the English speaking world, and that includes Europe, about the lack of good English among pilots and controllers in other regions. There are many who believe that English is the official language of aviation. There are others who believe that language is an issue of national sovereignty.

All of us, instructors, tongue-waggers and believers, are spinning around in our own little aviation circles. Or perhaps we’re more like meercats, popping up from our holes, looking around, and popping back into our holes again doing whatever it is we do in the privacy of our own institutions. Guarding our own biases and “silver bullets” from each other. What are missing are clear, unambiguous guidelines for language standardization.

CONCLUSIONS

One sky. One voice.

We need to take a pro-active approach to air safety by creating an International Work Conference on Language. The FAA, ICAO, civil aviation agencies and airlines can define the language needs of the aviation industry in association with those academies in Miami, Alaska, Bucharest, Santiago, Taiwan, Prague, Bath and around the world who work with aviation professionals to improve language skills. The goal of the conference would be to establish the basic language requirements for air safety and to develop a strategy for the implementation of these requirements.

We are in a growth industry. We need to employ the best of management practices and leadership skills in establishing global standards for communication. The patchwork approach to aviation English we now have may be better than nothing, but it is dangerously poor.

We in the communication business need to communicate with each other. Particularly in matters of language standards, we need to work with the FAA and its equivalent organizations around the world.

Leadership, Training, Communication, Strategy, Execution—all are good Aviation English terms. Put them together at an international language standards-setting conference. There, we can aspire to something a great deal better than anything we've ever taught before.